

# New accent, same Manish!

As the new Indian Accent opens, some memories of Manish Mehrotra and his amazing journey



Indian Accent at The Lodhi hotel has a warm room and food that is even better than usual (Raj K Raj)

I was trying to remember when a consensus arose that Manish Mehrotra was India's greatest modern chef and that Indian Accent was the best restaurant in the country – the modern equivalent of Bukhara.

Sometimes it feels like it has always been like this. But deep down, I knew that couldn't be true. So, last week, when I went to the preview of the new Indian Accent at The Lodhi hotel in Delhi, I asked Manish and Rohit Khattar, the owner (about whom I wrote at length a few months ago on these pages) how long it had been.

"Nine years," said Manish.

"That can't be true. We only opened in 2009," countered Rohit.

Finally, we agreed that it had been more than eight years, but less than nine. Which sounded about right because I remembered Manish coming on to *Foodistan* (a TV food competition on *NDTV Good Times* where I was a judge) in 2011 and still being relatively unknown.

I knew his food and had a deep appreciation of his talents so I wasn't as surprised as everyone else when he wiped out all the competition and emerged as the winner.

Since *Foodistan*, which Manish thinks was the turning point, he has never looked back. Indian Accent, which did only reasonably well till that point, suddenly became the rage with tables booked out weeks in advance, Manish got

the full rock star treatment from the media and Indian Accent went on to open a highly successful outlet in New York. London will be next.



Chef Manish Mehrotra, the man behind Indian Accent's amazing menu (Raj K Raj)

But, if I think very hard, I can remember the beginning. Rohit Khattar is a friend so when he asked me to check out Tamarai, a sort of nightclub he ran in London a decade ago, I said I would go. The food was pan-Asian and I wasn't wild about eating Thai food in London but Rohit was insistent. I had to go, he said, because he was very proud of the chef there. He was Indian and had previously worked at Oriental Octopus, one of Rohit's restaurants at India Habitat Centre.

***Manish's food was nothing like Indian food in London: no poncy presentation, no Frenchification etc. But it was nothing like Indian food in India either.***

So I went and of course, Rohit was right. Manish's food was outstanding. He had picked up his Oriental food in India (he started out at Mumbai's Thai Pavilion) and was therefore, not wedded to any one school of Asian cuisine. Normally, a Thai chef will never really understand Indonesian food, a Japanese chef will have trouble adjusting to Malaysian cuisine and so on. But for Manish, all the techniques and flavours of Asia were no more than starting points for his own cuisine. I came away incredibly impressed by his talent and flair.

Then, a little later, Rohit took The Manor hotel in Delhi's Friends Colony, which has a long and chequered history (it was briefly an Aman hotel), on long lease. Around this time, Manish told Rohit that he wanted a) to return to Delhi and b) to open an Indian restaurant.



Entrepreneur Rohit Khattar is the owner of Indian Accent

Such was Rohit's faith in Manish that he agreed at once. Manish could take over the restaurant at The Manor, he said, and do what he liked with it. This represented an amazing leap of faith for Rohit because Manish had never cooked Indian food before. And it was a huge gamble for Manish because every restaurant that had ever opened in The Manor had failed.

I loved Indian Accent, as they decided to call it, from the day it opened. I think we may even have done the first major piece on it in these pages in 2009. What struck me was that Manish's food was hard to characterise. It was nothing like Indian food in London: no poncey presentation, no Frenchification, no stupid plating, etc. But here's the thing: it was nothing like Indian food in India either.

Many of the dishes Manish did in those days have been so widely copied that we may not remember that he created them. He did five shot glasses of various *paanis* (as in the *golgappa paani*) topped by five *puchkas*. He took juicy pork ribs and flavoured them with sweet chutney and pickle. He cut off chunks of Canadian bacon and paired it with kulchas. He recalled the *sitaphal* cream from Mumbai's Haji Ali and re-invented it. He pulled out memories from our collective youth: Old Monk Rum and Phantom candy cigarettes.



Chef Manish Mehrotra created the shot glasses of various golgappa paanis topped by puchkas, which have now been widely copied (Raj K Raj)

Indian Accent did well enough. Manish broke the jinx attached to the location. But there was no getting around the fact that Friend's Colony is hardly the centre of Delhi. Or that there was no signage to guide people through the residential streets that led to the Manor where Indian Accent was located. If you didn't know where to look, you wouldn't find Indian Accent.

Some of that changed after *Foodistan*. Because people saw Manish cook with his own hands in front of the cameras in high-pressure conditions, they marvelled at his abilities. In the team rounds, it was sometimes embarrassing to watch Manish's teammates because they fumbled around, not sure what to do next while Manish cooked for the whole team. At the end of one episode, I compared him to Amitabh Bachchan in the days when Bachchan was a one-man variety entertainment, fighting, singing, dancing, doing comedy, weeping, shouting and emoting in each movie. Just as Amitabh's success made singers and comedians redundant, Manish had made his teammates seem unnecessary. (He was delighted by the compliment: Manish is a fanatical Bachchan fan!)

After the telecast, the Manor started special *Foodistan* menus, including dishes that Manish had cooked on the show. And word of mouth was so swift and sudden that the restaurant was full every night. They started doing two sittings and both sold out days in advance. There was always talk that Indian Accent would open in Mumbai and Manish was not averse to the idea. He had begun bleeding staff because restaurateurs were coming to the Indian Accent kitchen and offering the chefs double their existing salaries. So Manish thought that a second Indian Accent would at least offer his chefs more opportunities to grow within the company.



A scallop and rawa shrimp combo is one of the new dishes at Indian Accent (Raj K Raj)

Eventually, Rohit rejected the Mumbai option and chose the most difficult course of all. He opened a second Indian Accent in New York, a city with no particular love of Indian food.

Manish worked his butt off creating new dishes for the opening, but refused to compromise on Indian flavours. He imported Indian ghee and every other key flavour ingredient. He even imported Tata salt because fancy American salts did not taste right. Most Indian restaurants in the US use self-raising flour for their naans (which is why their breads never taste right) but Manish made sure that the Indian Accent naans were made with the sort of atta we use in India.

Once Indian Accent was established in New York, Rohit started looking at London. He already ran Chor Bizarre, a flourishing Indian restaurant in Mayfair, so it was easy enough to decide to close it down and to convert the space to Indian Accent, London.

But even as the London plans were afoot, Rohit received an approach from The Lodhi hotel in Delhi. The Lodhi had begun life as The Aman. DLF had bought the Aman chain globally. Then, they had sold it off but kept the Delhi property, which they renamed The Lodhi. The hotel's flagship restaurant was On The Waterfront which, when it opened, was very good. But after a series of personnel changes, it fell on hard times and over the last year or so, the food was truly terrible.

Ironically, this was the time the restaurant did the best because The Oberoi shut for a revamp and all the regulars at Threesixty° looked for a new place to go to. On The Waterfront is in the same general area so it got the guests who had been left bereft by Threesixty°'s closure.

But The Oberoi opens again in January and The Lodhi management recognised that there would be an exodus of guests to the new Threesixty°. So, the hotel needed a powerful new brand.



Pork belly with an intense lamb reduction is one of the new additions to the menu (Raj K Raj)

They reached out to Rohit just as Indian Accent had hit turbulence. The Supreme Court had banned the serving of liquor near highways and this had hurt Indian Accent. Rohit Khattar knew that the problem would be resolved (it was) but the crisis led him to look anew at other locations. The Lodhi is in the centre of Delhi and the On The Waterfront space is larger than the room at The Manor.

So, Rohit agreed to shift the restaurant. But because The Lodhi was in a hurry (The Oberoi was opening), he had to do it at a time when they had planned to concentrate on the London opening.

The good news is that Rohit and Manish have pulled it off. I went for the first dinner service at the new location (Pre-opening) and the restaurant is amazing: a warm room, a great location and food that is even better than usual.

Some of the old Manish favourites are there but there are wonderful new dishes including a great pork belly with an intense lamb reduction , a scallop and *rawa* shrimp combo and wonderful chicken koftas. This is better food than Manish has ever done.

So now, Manish goes back to the city where I first met him. Will he take London by storm?